

## CHAPTER 1

# BE YOURSELF

### THE HIGH COST OF CONFORMITY, AND HOW TO AVOID IT

I was biking with my friends Eric and Adam, both far more skilled and experienced mountain bikers than I, on terrain that was slightly beyond my own skill. I thought I could do it.

I was wrong.

I suffered a pretty dramatic crash, falling down a ravine, flipping over a few times, and hitting my (helmeted) head on a tree. Eventually, I ended up in the emergency room – but not before riding another hour.

Everything turned out fine, but continuing after my crash was a poor decision. Not only was I riding injured, but, because I was tight with fear, I fell many more times.

Why didn't I stop? I wish I could say it was bravery but, the truth is, it was nothing of the kind. I kept riding, quite simply, because Eric and Adam kept riding.

There are a host of tangled reasons, of course: I didn't want to disrupt their ride or feel like a wimp who couldn't handle a few falls, or give up on something that I started. But the real reason I continued? Because they did.

It turns out that I'm not alone. The research shows that, even as adults, we tend to conform to the behaviors of those around us. If your colleagues take sick days, then you'll start taking them too. If your colleagues are messy, you'll become more messy, too.

Which is not such a big deal, really. Until it is.

Take the Volkswagen diesel scandal, for example. Volkswagen installed software in diesel cars to manipulate emissions tests and illegally sidestep pollution standards. They lied to millions of consumers.

When Michael Horn, head of Volkswagen Group of America, testified at a congressional hearing, he said that he believed only “a couple of software engineers” were responsible.

Seriously? Only a couple? At the time of the scandal, Volkswagen employed 583,000 people. Surely more than two people knew about this deception. Why didn’t anybody say anything?

One reason might be that aggressive and pressured goal setting can lead to cheating, lying, and misdirected efforts (to avoid punishment of failure). And certainly we’ve heard that Volkswagen’s culture was brutally focused on achieving their goals.

But seven years and 11 million cars later, you would think that *someone* would say *something*. But they didn’t. Because saying something, when nobody else is saying anything, is really, really hard.

Still, that’s what we must do if we don’t want to lose ourselves to conformity. It takes confidence to stand apart. To be willing to move in a different direction than others. But it builds confidence too. Every time we choose to be who we are, different from those around us, we’re *developing* our confidence. The real question then – for you and me – is how can we resist the pull of conformity and stand courageously in truth and right? How can we live the values that make us trustworthy? How can we be true to ourselves in the midst of intense pressure to conform?

1. The first step is to have clear, strong, and committed values. What do you believe in? And how resolutely are you willing to stand behind those beliefs? Are you willing to be vulnerable? To be embarrassed? To be disliked? To be fired? Powerful, trustworthy people answer yes to all of those questions.
2. The next step is to want to see what is going on around you. Can you see it for what it is?

3. Finally, you need the courage to act when something is going on that is out of sync with your values. To say something. To stand up to power, if that's what it takes. And to do it skillfully and with respect, so that you are not only more likely to succeed, but also to preserve the relationships around you where possible.

This last one – courage to act – is the most difficult. Difficult because it requires that we go against the norm of what is going on around us. And, while that might be something we're born with, it doesn't come naturally to us as adults. It takes practice.

Practice in small ways. Keep common workspace clean when everyone around you is leaving it messy. Work every day even when the people around you are taking sick days. Act or speak differently than the people around you. Choose not to eat dessert or drink when everyone else is. Make different choices than others.

When you do those things, slow down enough to feel its impact on you. Knowing you can tolerate that feeling is the secret to escaping its hold on you. And that gives you the freedom to act in line with your values.

If we assume that more than a couple of individuals knew about the software scam at Volkswagen, then they fell down in one of these three steps. Either they weren't clear, strong, and committed to the value of truth and honesty in business. Or they chose not to see. Or they lacked the courage to say something.

But I know that it's hard. They would have been risking their friends, their jobs. They would have violated the trust of some coworkers in order to maintain the trust of other coworkers and customers. They would have had to stand alone. Those are hard decisions to make.

I should know. I biked an hour longer than I should have, injured and falling, because I lacked the courage to tell my friends – supportive, caring friends – that I had had enough.

I guess I needed more practice finding my ground ...

